

FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: July 13, 2016

Agenda Item: 2016 Wolf Hunting Seasons, Quotas, HD Boundaries, and SB 200 Quotas

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 30 Min

Background: Regulated hunting and trapping of wolves was endorsed by the Governor's Wolf Advisory Council in 2000 and is included in Montana's wolf conservation and management plan. Wolf seasons have evolved over the years from the first season in 2009 having a conservative hunting-only quota of 75 wolves, to including trapping in 2012, to the current season with no quota except near the national parks and sportspersons may take up to five wolves. Montana's wolf management is a success story. We maintain a healthy, viable and connected population on Montana's modern landscape while allowing harvest and reducing conflicts. Other than regular calendar rotation and the specific WMU 313 proposal outlined below, FWP is proposing no change to the 2015-16 season structure. This proposal differs from that presented in May by proposing a harvest quota of 4 instead of 6, and rather than a biological basis it is openly meant to address human social values. The biological consequences to either the wolf or the elk population will be minimal, if even measurable, but may continue to grow the wolf population.

In WMU 313 we are proposing to: 1) increase the quota from two to four wolves; 2) institute a split season with the wolf quota divided equally into two hunt periods to minimize the chance of overharvesting any one particular pack; and 3) institute a no wolf trapping zone in the Deckard Flat – Trail Creek elk closure area because of concerns over conflict with recreationists and dogs.

Hunters have long noted that they continue to lose elk hunting opportunity while wolves have been increasingly protected by establishing quota areas and continually reducing harvest quotas, contrary to direction in the commission-approved Wolf Conservation and Planning Document. Non-consumptive users continue to push for reduced wolf harvest. This tug-and-pull has been the cause of continuing social angst. Outside of WMU 313, wolf management in the rest of Montana has been remarkably successful because FWP has been able to address most social concerns with reasonable wolf harvest while maintaining healthy, viable and connected wolf populations. The proposal for WMU 313 strikes a reasonable social balance by slightly increasing wolf harvest as a nod to that interest while presenting minimal impact to the non-consumptive user. More information is found in a revised season justification in the commission packet.

Senate Bill 200 allows landowners to take wolves that are a potential threat to human safety, livestock or domestic dogs. The Commission annually approves a quota for SB 200 take, which last year was up to 100 in separate commission-approved intervals of 25. Typically, few wolves are taken under SB 200 with 6 in 2014 and 12 in 2015. FWP proposes no change to the SB 200 quotas.

Public Involvement Process & Results: The public comment period went to June 18 and we received 655 communications. It was clear there had been an organized effort to oppose the original proposal because, different than the usual comment demographic, about 2/3 were from out of state and most spoke to opposing hunting and trapping and that increasing wolf harvest will affect wolf viewing opportunity. Although there was support for the original proposal and also for a much higher harvest of wolves, that sentiment was far outweighed among the comments received.

Alternatives and Analysis: The proposals may be approved as proposed, with adjustment, with additions, with deletions or no change from 2015-16 per staff justifications, public comment and/or commission direction.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: This mostly status quo proposal is aligned with known biology, management history and experience, livestock depredation trends, survey efforts, and public comment. It's consistent with wolf season objectives, other species management and continues to value wolves as an integral component of functioning ecosystems.

Proposed Motion

I move the Commission approve the proposed 2016-2017 wolf season and SB 200 quota as presented by FWP.